

Over and Over by YumKiwiDelicious

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Summary:

“Seriously though,” Maxine chuckled after a while, “Get to know Steve. If he turns out to be a huge asshole then just stop talking to him.”

Something in their lives had to be normal.

Steve could be normal.

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Summary for the Chapter:

"And if you're ever tired of being known for who you know
You know, you'll always know me"

Billy let his eyes slide around the conference room and bemoaned another day surrounded by a bunch of backwoods bumpkins who didn't know their assholes from a tailpipe. Hawkins, Indiana was as uninteresting as Billy had assumed it would be when he had refused to move there three years prior. Every single building looked like it had been built in the seventies and had not been changed since, including the middle school Billy found himself working at. The PE teacher position had been the only job in the depressingly small town that seemed like it could even remotely suit Billy and still it was a huge pain in the ass. Julie was constantly reminding him to be friendly to his boss and coworkers so that they wouldn't have any more reason to fire him; he was already working in a school without any sort of license, may as well kiss ass and lay low.

For whatever reason all the preteens seemed to adore Coach Hargrove, but still it didn't make up for the daily torture of actually showing up. A little piece of him died every time he stepped onto the shitty little gym's hardwood, whistle shiny around his neck. The school was considerably smaller than the ones in California; dull in color, scarcely decorated, but neat and organized all the same. It had taken Billy all of two days to get the layout of the whole place and he'd only needed to ask directions to the nurse's office once to check on a boy who had gotten a bloody nose during basketball drills. Billy had no formal training on how to deal with kids and the principal and staff had no quick tips to share. Julie had assured him he'd do great.

Sure.

He had three classes -sixth, seventh, and eighth graders- and none of them had been given a heads up about getting a new teacher, and a young one at that. His first day when he had been introduced to his

students had been awkward as hell with the Vice Principal announcing him with all the enthusiasm of a wet blanket. The kids were shocked and immediately overdramatized, the boys thinking they wanted to test this 'Cali boy' and the girls all automatically developing creepy crushes on Coach Hargrove. The first attempt to actually get them to shut up and exercise had ended with Billy shouting way too loudly. He had never seen so much snot and tears in such a short amount of time, but for some crazy reason their attachment to him seemed to be forged in those gross fluids from that day on. Every day, nice or mean, happy or irritated, the kids seemed determined to give Billy whatever he asked for and win his approval. He could cuss and shoo at them all he wanted and still they were never as terrified as they were on that first day.

It was advantageous in that they worked hard and followed instructions immediately, but exhausting because once class was over they would linger and cling. They always asked so many questions and he had no idea how to answer them, but Julie assured him it could be much worse. Billy supposed that every once and a while the kids were funny and even cute, their senses of humor and self developing right before his eyes. Still, he didn't actually plan to stay at the school long and so denied invites to birthday parties and was very protective of his ID badge. It was printed with his actual first name and the kids were obsessed with finding out what it was. A game they had invented all on their own was that they would make guesses at Billy's first name and each time they were wrong he was allowed to hurl a kickball at them that they had to attempt to dodge or they would be 'out'. Sometimes their capture-the-flag games would turn into capture-the-tag and Billy would find himself laughing, keeping out of their reach easily as they sprinted back and forth across the field chasing him. When these things happened he almost liked working as a teacher.

Almost.

His co-workers were difficult people to deal with though. There were three other specialist teachers -music, art, and library- and they were a gaggle of busybodies who refused to leave him in peace. Billy barely knew their names and had absolutely no desire to socialize yet still during his prep one or two of them would find their way to his

lounge table and start flapping their lips about one thing or another. Most of the other staff at the school were decades older than he was and the ones that weren't had clearly all come from the same highschool because they traveled in a huddled pack all through the halls. Billy particularly disliked the English teachers because they reminded him of the cliquey, beach bimbos in California; constantly giggling behind their hands and whispering during staff meetings.

Besides the other specialists, it was very rare for other teachers to attempt to make conversation with Billy unless they were asking him to dismiss their class or for some other school-related favor. He was glad for the wide berth everyone seemed to give him even though Julie was very adamant he try to make some friends in town. He really wasn't interested in the idea and had no intention of carrying on with a penpal when they finally moved back to California so for the most part he just kept to himself.

He absolutely hated Hawkins.

Principal Coleman had sent an email the night before letting all the staff know they were expected to attend an early morning meeting to talk about preparations for the upcoming Spring Fling Dance. Billy of course thought the whole thing seemed annoying and stupid, but still slumped into a conference room chair right as the meeting was about to start and managed to sit through the whole thing without blowing his brains out. Everyone else in the room seemed to be filled with energy and excitement for the event and it honestly made him want to roll his eyes all the way back to Venice Beach.

Near the front he could see the English teachers at it as always, talking amongst themselves even as Coleman started to divvy out tasks for the dance. Two of them were women around his age while the other was a tall and skinny young man with hair entirely too voluminous for seven in the morning. He had been the one to point Billy towards the nurse's office his first week. As the principal slid a list of to-dos in front of him on the table, the teacher smiled, bid farewell to his team, and made a beeline for Billy's empty table.

The PE teacher tensed a bit when the other man took a seat, a bright smile already lighting up his entire face. The principal had not given Billy his own list of tasks to complete for the dance so he had

assumed he was home free, but now this man was here. Apparently the whole thing was meant to be a team effort and Billy couldn't remember ever wishing so hard for the existence of a Dance Committee in his entire life. All over the room staff were teaming up with friends or just people they shared a lunch with and when everyone was settled again, the principal returned to the front of the room.

He was talking about the dance no doubt, but Billy hardly heard him. For one, he wasn't interested, and for another the English teacher kept shooting him tiny little smiles out the corner of his eye. The first one had confused Billy too much to make a return gesture, but by the third he was nodding his head politely back. The guy's eyes were big and brown and earnest and by the sixth smile Billy had the distinct feeling that someone had taken a liking to him. It was beyond awkward, but the meeting felt less boring with his company.

"So that's really it," Coleman was wrapping up before too long. Billy blinked. He had totally missed everything. "Get your lists done with your partner or team and notify me as soon as possible. If you're working together it shouldn't take you too long at all. I'll give you the rest of this meeting time to discuss."

Billy looked around the room casually, not really sure how to greet the perfect stranger across from him who apparently wanted to work together. He was smiling again and Billy got the odd feeling he was looking at absolutely all the guy's teeth at once. When it became obvious he had no intention of heading back to his original table, Billy slumped forward a little, resigned to finally having to 'get to know someone'.

"William, right?" the brunette inquired, huge eyes dancing amusedly at his coworker. "I'm Steve Harrington, good to meet you."

"Uh, no one really calls me that," he murmured, reaching out to shake the hand Steve offered him. "I'm Billy."

"Billy," the other tested, glancing all over his face. Pretty much every person he'd ever met had told him he didn't look like a 'Billy', but he hardly looked like a 'William' either if you asked him. "Cool. I'm kinda shocked we haven't met yet. When did you start?"

"Start of term," Billy answered casually, not concerned at all that the other guy hadn't noticed him walking around campus for an entire year. Still, Steve's bouncy energy made him feel all weird. "And we have met before, you pointed me to the nurse's office to check on a kid."

"Really?" Steve's smile faltered ever so slightly. "I don't remember that at all, but I hear about you all the time."

Billy quirked a brow suspiciously. "You do?"

"Oh yeah, all my seventh grade girls are in love with you," the other man scoffed amusedly, a smile splitting open his face again. Billy was starting to feel a little uncomfortable. "As soon as they come in from PE it's *'Oh Coach Hargrove is sooo handsome! Did you see his shorts today? God, I want him!'*." When Billy's eyebrows rose in disbelief, Steve let out a small cackle. "You never noticed? Well, I think it's normal, you're new and young and came all the way from California. They're fascinated by you."

Billy cleared his throat in embarrassment. He knew the girls in his periods had crushes on him, but he hadn't figured it would be a topic of discussion outside of the gym. He really hoped none of the other teachers thought he was encouraging this behavior, he wasn't a pedo or anything. He probably wouldn't even recognize half of his students out on the street. He cut eyes at his coworker who was still chuckling lowly to himself. He didn't seem too concerned.

Steve reached out and smacked his arm amicably. Billy flinched. "Chill, man, it's harmless!" He let his voice drop a little in an inconspicuous way. "My first year they were all about me too; the novelty fades. Helps that I used to babysit a lot of them."

Billy almost snorted at the arrogance, but instead ended up smirking. Steve was funny. He noticed that his big-eyed colleague was watching him intently, if not a little curiously, as if waiting for him to continue on with this conversation he had been taken hostage in. "So...you're an English teacher?"

"Yep," Steve replied, beaming happily at him. "Seventh grade. Nancy over there teaches sixth and Carol does eighth. She's braver than I

am.”

"Right," Billy muttered, not glancing up to see which teacher was which. They honestly looked exactly the same to him.

"You're the first new male teacher we've gotten since I started," Steve informed, matter-of-factly, supporting his elbow on the table. He was wearing a cardigan. "I guess Byers is around, but we got hired at the same time. Other than us, and now you, it's all women.”

"Okay..."

Why was this conversation becoming more awkward by the second? Not only that, why was this person – an overly friendly stranger – talking to him like they had known each other since forever? Billy wasn't exactly a people person, Juliette told him as such all the time, so he was sure he was missing the point of this whole interaction. Harrington probably just wanted to make him feel welcome and comfortable or some shit like that. Still, talking about their job, which they both had the experience of working every day, seemed like the wrong way to do it. Not that Billy knew anything about it, anyway.

He absolutely hated trying to make friends.

"Wanna just get started?" Steve suggested then, seeming to drop the attempt at small talk. He slid their to-do list over for Billy to look over and started talking energetically about plans for the dance. They had been tasked with planning the music for the night. Whether that meant hiring a DJ, making a playlist, or picking up some guitars themselves was left entirely up to their discretion but their budget was highlighted and circled in big colorful strokes at the bottom of the page. If they went over that amount they'd be coming out of pocket.

As they worked together, Steve did most of the talking, which was fine by Billy, since the other seemed to have a mouth big enough to talk for a mob of people. As he babbled on and on and listed off different music shops and musicians he knew in town, Billy looked at him sideways in a bemused sort of way. He noticed how the other man's weirdly open and naive personality made it very easy to relax

around him. His deer-caught-in-the-headlights eyes would catch Billy's in an overly intense stare and then flit away as he continued describing some plan or another while the PE teacher just listened. Maybe it was just Billy's imagination, but there definitely was some kind of unspoken empathy there and it was kind of freaking him out.

Billy was pretty picky about people and didn't like being approached, but here was Harrington just bullying his way into his space and being so damn nice about it too. Billy was a little intrigued, but he'd never say it out loud. It was a strange feeling though. Steve wasn't anything like Billy's friends back in California and yet something about him didn't seem like the worst thing ever. He was loud and dressed kind of preppy and was overly nice, but for some reason Billy didn't mind. Maybe the midwest had made him soft, maybe he was just a little sick of not a single person talking to him everyday, who the fuck knew. Still he kind of hoped Harrington would keep talking to him for a little while.

Steve had graduated from Indiana State the previous year, but he wanted to go back for his Master's. He wanted to travel the world teaching English in foreign countries. He also loved talking. Or rather, he loved talking to a point where it provoked Billy to talk if only to tell him to shut the fuck up for two seconds. It wasn't like he asked especially complicated or personal questions. No, he simply excelled at small talk and, much to Billy's dismay, was good at making him enjoy it even if the topics he chose were, on the surface, boring as hell. Like the one time when he'd asked Billy if he liked cats. When Billy had said he didn't give a shit about cats, Steve had rambled on and on about how cute and fluffy cats were and why everybody should definitely have one for a pet.

Harrington had also somehow made it a habit to bump into Billy on campus every single day whether their schedules put them in the same place or not. This had never happened before they started talking though, so Billy had his suspicions as to why the English teacher always just so happened to show up in the lounge right at the end of his prep on Thursday. They'd exchange a few casual words and then Steve would be on his merry way. Sometimes, Billy

wondered if the brunette really had taken a liking to him or if he had taken him on as some kind of charity case because, seriously, Steve got along with fucking everyone.

Billy's behavior made it clear that he wasn't there to make friends and that, apart from a few people who didn't grate his nerves just by opening their mouths, he didn't really like any of his co-workers. Steve knew this, and didn't seem to want to force him inside one clique of teachers or support staff. Billy found it all very odd. Mostly, Steve just liked to talk to him about random shit. Billy didn't mind because he maybe, just barely, liked Steve a little. He didn't know the man all that well, but they got along fine and he was a nice distraction from the monotony of being at work.

One day, Billy took the time to actually drop his seventh grade students off at their next period rather than just shooing them out the gym and got to see the way Steve greeted his class. He seemed to genuinely like and care about all the kids individually, talking to them on a friendly and personal level and laughing openly when they vied for his attention. It was clear that the kids not only respected, but admired the man as well. He was a born teacher, unlike Billy who could feel his blood pressure rising each day as he approached the school from the parking lot. He couldn't wait til Max graduated and he could hightail it back to California with Juliette.

However, he didn't mind staying late to plan for the dance with Harrington. They had agreed that a mix of live band and good old fashioned smartphone hooked up to the speaker system would be the best option and spent a lot of afternoons together curating the perfect playlist. None of the music of today really interested Billy, he was more of a classic rock guy, but listening to Harrington passionately explain why the night *had* to start with '*Party Rock Anthem*' by the LMFAO and end with '*Firework*' by Katy Perry was pretty entertaining. He vetoed the inclusion of '*California Girls*', but the list still came together to Steve's liking without it.

The night of the dance wasn't the worst thing that had ever happened to him and he had to admit he was impressed with the band Steve had found to play for free. Apparently Hagan's husband, Tommy, still 'jammed' with his buddies from highschool for fun and they were just looking for an easy gig to stretch their fingers. They took requests

and kept it fun and when they were resting Steve's phone did all the heavy lifting. The girls were loud and excited and didn't even seem to mind that the boys were shuffling awkwardly on the edges of the dance floor.

A handful of teachers had been chosen to chaperone and Steve had volunteered them without Billy's say. The whole night, the California native was annoyed to notice he could hardly keep his eyes off the brunette as he laughed and made small talk with the other staff and his students. Part of Billy wished he could be that easy going and approachable, but then he figured he'd only want to be like that to put Harrington more at ease which made no sense at all. His annoyance faded the longer he watched Steve shimmying around behind the punch bowl and laughing far too loudly at whatever Wheeler was continuously whispering into his ear. He even felt his mouth twitching up at the corners when ' *California Girls*' came over the speakers.

It was a nice night.

When the last song was set to play and kids were starting to make their way out to their waiting parents, Steve left his station and found his way over to Billy, still sitting at the desk they'd set up for tickets even though no newcomers had arrived in over an hour. He slumped down in the seat beside him which Byers had been occupying up until a few minutes ago and clapped him on the back.

"Sup?" he inquired in a huff, half breathless from dancing his way across the gym. "You should definitely go dance, the girls would go nuts."

"I ain't tryin' to fight any dads tonight," Billy dismissed, glancing out the double doors as he thought about taking a smoke break. Probably not enough time. He glanced back at Harrington and found the English teacher smiling at him sneakily. His brown eyes looked black in the low light, his chocolatey hair falling over his forehead

"I bet it'd be fun!" Steve pressed on, once he managed to catch his breath. He pushed an elbow into Billy's side. "Bonding with the kids and all that."

"I already bond with the little shits enough as it is."

"You're so mean," the brunette teased, looking out across the dancefloor fondly. The girls were absolutely losing their shit to 'Firework'. "You really don't like teaching, do you?"

"It's a job, and it pays alright," Billy replied simply. He checked his watch. "Two more minutes before lights go up. You should hurry if you still want to ask Wheeler to dance."

"Do I sense sarcasm and jealousy?" Steve inquired with a grin. Billy didn't budge. "I didn't even know you knew Nancy's last name."

"Didn't know her first name," Billy corrected truthfully. Weirdly enough in the school setting all the adults seemed to go by their last names out of habit from the kids. Steve was always talking about Nancy and Carol and Jonathan, but Billy had no idea who any of them were. It strengthened his theory they'd all been in highschool together.

"Of course not." Steve sounded playfully condescending, but he just tilted his head at his coworker curiously with a look Billy didn't really understand but that he had become used to. "I don't wanna dance with Nancy anyway. I'll hang with you 'til lights up. After all, it's not like we get to hang out like this every night."

Billy couldn't really see how this had anything to do with 'hanging out', but he didn't bother to correct his new friend. It felt weird to already be thinking about the other as such, but to his usually very impenetrable good graces where Steve was slowly worming his way in, it made a bit of sense. Also, he appreciated the company since it was kind of boring to just supervise the door by himself and not do anything else. And he definitely didn't want to go dance.

At the end of the dance, Steve had been unavoidably kidnapped by some of the families who wanted to talk to him, and Billy didn't really feel like interrupting just to say goodbye. He left the gym and lit one of his cigarettes, fumbling about his pockets in search of his

keys when he heard his name being called. With a cigarette hanging from his lips, Billy stopped in his tracks and looked over his shoulder to see Harrington running towards him. He'd thrown his coat on and grabbed his messenger bag before charging into the parking lot.

"Damn, you could've waited for me!" he huffed, pouting ever so slightly as he came to halt in front of his coworker.

Billy took the cigarette from his mouth with two fingers and expelled the smoke. "You were busy,"

"Well, I wasn't going to be busy forever," Steve defended, as they resumed walking together. They'd started parking next to each other every day. Purely coincidence. "Heading home?"

Billy was a bit curious to know where Steve would think he'd go after a full day of work, three hours of dance set up, and then three hours of the actual dance, but he didn't get the chance to ask. His mobile phone vibrated inside his pocket and he fished it out, quickly checking his received messages.

"Someone waiting on you?" the brunette inquired casually. They'd yet to broach the subject of Billy's home life and he supposed now was as good a time as any.

"Yeah, my wife," he informed, shoving his smoke back into his mouth so that both hands were free to text Julie back. "Her and my kid sister are waiting for me to grab dinner."

Steve was silent for a few seconds, during which Billy finished his text and shoved his phone back inside his pocket. He'd changed from gym shorts to jeans before the dance. When he took a drag from his cigarette again, he chanced a glance at his coworker, who was watching him with a shocked expression.

"What?"

"Are you serious right now?" Steve squinted at him in disbelief. "You're married?"

"Yeah, since I was like twenty," Billy replied, finding the other man's surprise a little offensive. He plucked his cigarette from his mouth

once more and then turned the hand holding it around to face Steve. His gold wedding band caught the parking lot lights. "Thought you would've noticed by now."

He could've sworn Steve turned a sickly shade of grey, but then suddenly the other man was blushing violently and looking very put out. "Well, how am I supposed to notice stuff like that unless I'm looking for it?" he grouched, shoving his hands in his pockets. "How old are you again?"

"I'll be twenty-three this summer. She just turned twenty-one."

"Jesus," Steve said, shaking his head from side to side. "We're the same age and I still live with a roommate. I suppose you already have your own place and everything?"

Billy just shrugged. "Kinda. Me and Julie moved here to look after my step-sister when her mom left my dad. She didn't wanna move all over the place while Susan 'found herself' so we stay in her old house. It's already paid off and all that."

"Huh..." Steve murmured simply, apparently at a loss for anything else to say. They'd reached their cars by now and were just standing in the small space between them. Their coworkers were still held up in the gym, having stayed to help with clean up, but the surrounding area was filled with sleepy preteens being guided into their folks' cars. Billy noticed Steve had taken on a somewhat serious expression, choosing to look straight ahead with a thoughtful frown.

"What?" Billy inquired, flicking some ash to the ground and stomping on it. "You heartbroken or something, pretty boy?" He ignored Steve's reproachful look as he approached his driver's side door. Harrington hated that nickname.

"Fuck off, I'm just surprised," the English teacher admitted, shrugging. "I mean...you're young, but you seem like someone who handles their shit, so I'm sure you got married knowing exactly what you were getting into."

"Sure."

They stared at each other over the roof of Billy's Camaro silently. Engines were starting all around them. Steve looked like he was waiting to say something and Billy was good to wait him out. He wanted to finish his smoke and he was just going to grab pizza on the way home to Juliette and Maxine anyway. He puffed silently and looked around at the night sky.

"So..." Steve said finally, voice raspy until he cleared his throat. "Some of the other teachers like to grab food at the diner on Main sometimes. They're pretty cool once you get to know them. You should try hanging out with us sometime."

For a hot minute, Billy's narrowed eyes observed the young man in front of him, though his image was obscured by smoke. He wondered why the other teacher seemed so jumpy and nervous when usually he didn't seem to give a single shit whether he was stepping on someone's toes or not. Maybe it was that he was scared Billy might give him a dickish reply, or flat out refuse. Billy wouldn't put it past himself, not even with Harrington, but he had to admit he kind of liked how hopeful the guy looked.

"I'll think about it," he said, and even though his tone was plain and nonchalant, Steve's face visibly lit up and his smile broadened. Billy tossed his cigarette down and crushed it under his shoe with an eye roll.

"Awesome!" the other man exclaimed, clearly relieved. "We'll get together on Thursday, since you don't work tomorrow." Steve worked five days a week, but Billy only worked four, and the next day, Wednesday, was his day off. It was weird that Steve knew that. The English teacher waved to him in a friendly gesture. "You have over twenty four hours to think about it. Long enough for you?"

The brunette winked at him and Billy rolled his eyes again. "Sure, dumbass. I gotta go."

"Uh, yeah, me too!" He slapped the top of Billy's hood. "See ya, Hargrove!"

Harrington slipped into his own car (a fancy ass Beamer; they had discussed briefly how they were both Classic Car Guys), music

immediately blasting out the speakers as soon as the engine rolled over, and sped out of the lot. Billy watched him go, torn between confusion and amusement as he went about getting into his own ride far more calmly. As he buckled up and did all the safety check shit Juliette was always nagging him about, he thought about Steve. Did Harrington really like him, even though he was such a sullen, antisocial prick? It would be nice, he figured, to actually have someone who liked him for his personality rather than his looks like back in California.

Billy had never had many friends. More croney's than anything, and even still they weren't people Billy would have hung around if they didn't have anything to offer him. In Hawkins it was different. No one had anything to offer him and his wife and sister had been up his ass constantly about meeting new people. Julie especially, social butterfly that she was, wanted him to at least try to make nice with his coworkers.

Juliette had known him most of his life; had been there when his mom skipped town and when Susan had shown up with Max in tow. Had always stuck by Billy even through his horrible temper and caustic personality. She was as sweet as honey and still wanted to be around his sour ass. Them ending up married had been a shock to everyone, including Billy himself, but it worked and he didn't really want to let her down after dragging her out here. Billy wasn't a bad person (anymore) he just had shit social skills, but he supposed he could try to make a friendship work with Harrington even if the guy was like Juliette times one million and definitely wouldn't give him sex as a reward for being better. Still, he took Billy's moodiness in stride and didn't seem to be scared off by his resting bitch face. A friendship between them wouldn't be the worst thing to ever happen to him.

"He's kind of a pain in the ass," Billy started to conclude, wiping pizza grease off his hands before tossing his napkin down. His voice was pitched low so as not to disturb Julie asleep in the master bedroom. "But he's not so bad I guess."

"Well, that's a glowing recommendation if I ever heard one," Max snickered across from him.

Max, his kid sister, was still up and eating with him because she had the energy and appetite of a small dinosaur which was no big change from when she'd still been in California. She was different in other ways now, though. Taller, louder, and Billy was horribly sad to admit, prettier. She'd just been thirteen when Neil and Susan had decided to move to Indiana, but now she was well on her way to graduating highschool and wasn't half the pain in the ass Billy had known growing up. He almost regretted not being around for those precious formative years Susan had always been crying about.

"I'm glad you found a friend though," she mused seriously, picking sausage pieces off her last slice as she rested her elbow on the table. Still no manners. "You only ever hung out with Julie back home and I couldn't even tell if you liked her."

"Shut up," Billy huffed, tossing a black olive into her hair. It reached her waist now. "He's not my friend."

"Yet," Max smiled. "You've been talking like three weeks, it takes time to become friends with someone, but he seems nice from everything you've said."

"Yeah. Julie would be like, '*You should, like, get to know him !*.'" Billy imitated his wife with an exaggerated Valley Girl accent and his step sister snorted and laughed and flopped all around the table.

"*Billy !*" she continued, also adopting the accent, "*Billy, I will be so sick if you don't make some fucking friends !*"

They laughed some more and slapped at each other, no ill-will present in their humor. Max had known Juliette as long as she'd known Billy and loved her like a sister even before they got together. Admittedly, she'd been a little upset with the blonde when the one friend she had in her family had chosen to stay behind in California to be with her, but now she understood. Billy was almost positive Maxine would've followed her mother all over the country, school be damned, if she hadn't started dating some nerdy kid named Lucas Sinclair her freshman year. They were still together though, so there was that.

"Seriously though," the redhead chuckled after a while, wiping tears

from her eyes, “Get to know Steve. If he turns out to be a huge asshole then just stop talking to him.”

“Yeah, I guess,” her brother mused, his calm tone hiding the sudden excitement that splashed over him only to be immediately replaced by apprehension. He frowned down at his pizza crust. “You ever think...dad fucked up our chances to be normal with people?”

Max was silent for a beat, ginger eyes squinting all around the little kitchen she had practically grown up in. They didn’t talk about Neil Hargrove often and the man never reached out to check on them, but it was still a tense subject for them and even Juliette to some extent. “I don’t know about normal,” she said slowly, “But you seem much better for all your time away from him. So I think it couldn’t hurt to at least *try* to be fuckin’ normal, whatever the hell that means.”

Billy smirked at her filthy mouth, glad it hadn’t faded in all their years apart. She’d been such an annoying little kid when he met her, but then had picked up all the parts about Billy she thought were the coolest. He thought they were pretty cool too. He’d taught her how to surf and to board and to curse and shotgun a soda and now she was his responsibility and she was giving him advice on how to be normal. Life was so fucking weird. He looked down at his beer that he’d let her take a sip of, suddenly transfixed with the dark color.

Everything had been so different back in California. With Neil and Susan around it was like Billy could hardly breathe let alone talk to people. Juliette had been there but she’d been halfway between him and Max and sometimes he’d felt like he was sharing the blonde’s energy too liberally. She wasn’t the kid’s mom, she didn’t have to always be dressing her and shit, but if Julie didn’t do it who would? Billy? Neil hadn’t liked his son’s girlfriend at all and yet he’d liked her too much at the same time. Billy hated having her around the house but he needed her there. Neil wouldn’t smack him in front of his pretty little girlfriend.

Deciding to finally put his foot down and say no about moving to Indiana had been one of the toughest things he’d ever had to do. Not just because he’d had to stand up to his dad, but because he had to choose to let Max go, and finally make a serious commitment to Juliette. Her parents wouldn’t just let some passing boyfriend sleep

on the couch for the next few years; what were his intentions with their daughter?

Married at twenty and eighteen.

Now they were almost twenty-three and barely twenty-one taking care of a teenager in Hawkins, Indiana of all places.

It was crazy; it wasn't normal.

Something in their lives *had* to be normal.

Steve could be normal.

Steve was genuine. Every little trait, every gesture, every quirk, it was all sincere. He wasn't put off by Billy's bad attitude, or his practically teen marriage, or his guardianship of a red headed demon. Steve Harrington wanted to be friends with Billy Hargrove sincerely and wanted to talk his ear off during breaks and meet him at the diner after school. He wanted to plan dances and their playlists with Billy, for whatever reason, and it was totally normal. He seemed to understand that Billy needed time to adjust to socializing – especially with someone so outgoing – and still, he never stopped being who he really was. Somehow, that made Billy's curiosity grow.

Also, the California native would be lying if he said that he didn't enjoy the attention and the prospect of actually getting to know someone new after so long. Billy found himself smiling a bit, as he set his bottle down, feeling considerably more relieved and decided. He was also surprised at the realizations that he genuinely wanted to be friends with the brunette.

"Yeah," he said simply, offering his sister a wicked little smile. Max smiled back. "Yeah, I'll be fuckin' normal."

2. willow

Summary for the Chapter:

"I'm like the water when your ship rolled in that night
Rough on the surface but you cut through like a knife"

On Thursday morning, Billy woke up actually looking forward to hanging out with Steve and his group from work. It wasn't like he had ever spoken much to the others, but if Steve was there, he may just be able to resist opening his veins. Billy wasn't nervous, because fuck those guys, but the California native could admit he was a little anxious because he wasn't used to playing nice with others. This was going to be way out of his comfort zone and he'd only have Harrington there to ground him. The whole thing kind of made him want a cigarette.

Billy showed up to work a little bit earlier than usual, but only because he'd dropped Max off to see her nerd friends before school and *not* because he'd rushed her out the house either. She'd had a smarmy grin the whole way to the highschool and he'd been glad to finally kick her skinny ass out and head up the road to his job. He ignored the sort of giddy warmth that spread through him when he sauntered into the teacher's lounge and Steve was there, looking surprised but pleased to see him in one of his signature polos. He was kind of preppy and his fashion choices always left Billy feeling exasperated and awkward for reasons he couldn't name. Harrington was the kind of guy whose ass he would've kicked in school, but those days were behind him. Mostly.

The day dragged on like it normally did. The kids caught on to his good mood and promptly ruined it, but when the final bell rang Billy couldn't find it in himself to care. They all met up at the diner right after school and Billy felt a little out of place in his gym clothes, but none of them seemed to care as they loosened ties and tied their hair up. The group as a whole was pretty laid back and they seemed just tickled to have Billy tagging along. Steve made quick work of introductions and then they each repeated their names and positions

at a speed he could actually catch.

There was Nancy Wheeler; she taught sixth grade English and also coached the junior varsity cheer team. Jonathan Byers did sixth grade science and ran the school's photo club and yearbook. Carol Hagan had eighth grade English and proudly proclaimed she did nothing for the school outside of her regular paid hours. Billy thought he could get behind that kind of attitude. And of course there was Steve, resident loud mouth, seventh grade English teacher, and Billy was surprised to learn, head of the student council. The four of them all leaned in as Billy muttered about teaching physical education and then smiled as they welcomed him to Hawkins.

"You've been here all year and we've never spoken," Nancy noted, the first to actually pick up a menu and glance over it though Billy had to guess the place hadn't changed their burger options since '85. "The kids love you though."

Steve and Jonathan stifled snorts of laughter and Billy grumbled, "So I've heard."

After the usual getting-to-know-you small talk, the other three mostly chatted amongst themselves. Billy didn't mind, however, since it gave him a chance to observe them each individually. Jonathan seemed like the most reasonable and grounded of them all, even though Carol was the most confident—loud and insistent about even unimportant things. Nancy was as friendly as Steve, if not more; her too big eyes and sunny bright smile lighting up the whole table as she laughed with the waitress and waved to familiar faces that came and went. They all had a friendly air about them, trading smart-ass remarks and jabs and it was obvious they'd grown up together in this little town without any type of thought of leaving.

The diner was retro to say the least. Red checkerboard everywhere and neon signs around the jukebox. It smelled like grease and French fries and Billy was very curious if their malt was as thick as the menu claimed. They even still let people smoke inside and the gym teacher reached for a cigarette only to find his pockets came up empty when he patted them down looking for his lighter.

"Fuck," he muttered, cursing his basketball shorts for the millionth

time. Shit was always sliding out of them, especially when he sat down, and if he was lucky his lighter was crammed between the driver's seat and middle console of the Camaro right now and not gathering dust under the gym bleachers.

The sparking sound of a lighter igniting made itself known and Billy glanced over only to notice Harrington holding out a lighter for him. With a bemused crease between his brows, the blonde leaned over and let the other man light his tip up, tiny puffs fanning the flame at the end of his fingers. One good inhale later and he pulled back, brow still quirked at his coworker as Steve smiled almost shyly and stashed the drug store lighter back in his pocket. He was wearing khakis.

Billy asked, "You smoke?"

"Nah, I quit," Steve insisted, long fingers interlaced in his lap as he leaned over the table to look over his own menu. Billy frowned, not sure why a former smoker would carry a full lighter, but deciding not to take the bait. If Harrington was trying to play cool with him, it wouldn't work.

Looking across the table he noticed Jonathan was lighting up too and Carol and Nancy seemed completely used to the smog floating around their faces. Billy supposed it wasn't a crazy leap of the imagination to think all these small town teens had picked up smoking to seem cool back in highschool and now were just stuck with a bad nicotine addiction and smelly cars. If that were the case, the California native supposed it was pretty impressive that Harrington had been able to kick the habit if his friends still indulged.

Not that he gave a shit what Steve put in his lungs.

The high school buddies kept up the conversation, tossing Billy softball starters as they went, but the gym coach wasn't terribly interested in what they were saying. He let his cigarette burn down as he tried to imagine Harrington smoking. Tried to picture him holding a menthol (probably) between those knobby fingers and exhaling smoke when he laughed. It was a disturbing picture. Maxine had started to say that Billy looked like a dragon when he smoked and he didn't think he liked the idea of Steve breathing fire.

Not that he gave a shit what came out of Harrington's mouth.

"The kids know you smoked?" Billy inquired before he could stop himself. Harrington blinked at him. "Bet they'd be all bent outta shape if they knew Saint Steve lit up."

Steve laughed, "If they have an older sibling, they know a lot more about me than just that. Besides, it'd probably make them think I'm super sexy anyway."

"That so?" Billy challenged, narrowing his eyes.

Harrington beamed and Billy was reminded of the first day they met. The taller man smacked his shoulder. He didn't flinch anymore. "Of course! I don't know about California, but smoking still makes you look cool in Hawkins."

With his theory about a bad highschool habit proven, Billy gave an unimpressed snort and snagged his cigarette from between his lips. The waitress had brought them a clean ashtray as soon as they sat down and he flicked into it. "Seriously, dude?"

"Seriously, *dude*," Harrington snickered, reaching out without preamble and snatching Jonathan's cigarette from across the table. The science teacher barely glanced up, arm thrown over Nancy's shoulders, as Steve pressed the cancer stick into his own mouth. He inhaled deeply, brown eyes fluttering closed for just a moment before he struck an exaggerated pose; elbow on the table and brown locks pushed back from his face making him look tortured. Smoke billowed out from his nostrils.

"Don't I look hot?" he drawled, teeth flashing through the cloud as he cracked a smile. Billy made a show of waving the smoke away, his own cloud curling harmlessly above his head as he tried to give himself a moment to recover from the exact imagery he had just conjured a moment ago.

"Nah, you look like an ass," he lied, looking up to see that the waitress was back to take their orders.

Ignoring Harrington's affronted look, he ordered himself a bacon

burger, not bothering with any fries knowing he could always snag some of Steve's. The others ordered variations of the same meal and then a round of Cokes was brought to the table. The diner didn't serve alcohol else Billy would have gotten a beer. The familiar clamor of menus being passed back and drinks being set down distracted Steve from the smoking conversation and they moved on to discussing school drama. Billy was glad because he was more than a little uncomfortable with the fact that he actually did think Harrington looked cool with a cigarette. There was just something about his hands, his pose, and the way his lips formed around the smoke that was eye-catching and Billy wasn't sure he liked it.

"The girls were never into me the way they were into Steve," Jonathan swung back around to the conversation from earlier. "It was kind of weird."

"It was *super* weird!" Carol insisted, faced twisted up in a comical display of disgust. "It's like they were all about bony limbs and pastel polos last year, it was gross."

"Lay off," Steve grouched, smashing his stolen cigarette into the ashtray before moving to open his straw rapper. "It's not half as bad as the way they chase after Mr. Muscles over here."

Billy blinked, snuffing his own smoke as he turned to his coworker with a horrified expression. Wheeler was laughing fit to choke a horse. "Excuse me?"

"Come on, Billy," Nancy wheezed, wiping tears from beneath her eyes before they could fuck up her mascara. "You have to notice the way the girls all whisper and blush when you're around."

"Cause he's sexy!" Steve laughed, pushing at Billy's shoulder again as the blonde felt the back of his neck grow hot. He shot Steve a suspicious look. "Maybe if I looked like that I could've kept those little preteens' attention!"

"Or anyone's attention," Hagan huffed, smiling widely at the waitress who had returned with their burgers. Even Jonathan was stifling choked giggles now and Steve tossed his straw rapper at him irately. Billy was starting to regret coming.

“Shut up, man.”

“You couldn’t handle being as hot as Hargrove,” Carol continued her tirade as soon as everyone’s plate was situated and they were alone at the table again. “That big head of yours would grow three sizes too big.”

Billy was determined to disappear behind his burger and so had a mouthful of beef and bacon when Steve grouched back, “At least I’d be getting laid if I looked like Billy.”

Billy choked and the English teachers all began to whine and moan dramatically, Nancy rubbing her fingers together in a show of playing the world’s smallest violin for her friend. Steve smacked a hand on Billy’s back and waved the others off good naturedly, but made no move to take back his comments. None of the others seemed particularly put off by Steve calling another man sexy which was...interesting. Billy would have thought a bunch of country bumpkins would be nice and homophobic once they were comfortable, but they all just took Steve’s blatant compliments on how attractive the gym teacher was in stride. It made Billy’s face feel hot.

“Whatever, man,” Jonathan chuckled, picking at his side of fries, “At least you have some kind of sex appeal. I’m over here looking like a checked out library book.”

“That’s not true, babe,” Wheeler insisted. Her fingers were sneaking suspiciously close to Byer’s plate. “I think you’re very distinguished.”

“Geez, thanks...” the photographer retorted, looking downcast as a small handful of fries absconded from his dish.

“Can everyone stop dicking around, I’m trying to eat!” Carol bellowed, entirely too loud for Billy’s liking as the others just devolved into laughter. Steve hadn’t even picked up his burger this whole time, he was laughing so hard. If this was what it was like to hang out with a group of twenty-somethings, Billy didn’t know if he was cut out for it. “I should call the union on all of you. Especially you, Steve!”

“What’d I do?”

“You’re flirting with Hargrove right in front of my fries!”

“I’m not flirting!” the brunette defended, an edge to his previously jovial voice. He looked away from the young woman but ended up facing Billy instead, only for the two of them to end up caught in awkward eye contact since Billy had been staring at the side of Harrington’s face. They both turned away, much to Hagan’s amusement, and Billy noticed in his peripheral’s that the other man’s cheeks were going red. He also noticed that his own palms were feeling a bit sweaty, but that evidence could be rubbed away on his shorts.

“Whatever, you’ve been begging him to compliment you since we sat down,” the other teacher went on, unbothered by the fact her coworker was growing uncomfortable. Billy noticed something sharp in the corners of her eyes and mouth and thought that the two of them probably would have run in the same circles in high school. Which was to say she’d probably been a huge bully in her time. “*Billy, don’t I look cool smoking?! Billy’s so sexy! I wish I was good-looking like Billy-!*”

“He does look cool smoking and he is good-looking,” the blonde spoke up then. The table paused awkwardly, all eyes turning to him as he reached down to grab his burger again. He and Carol would have run in the same circle, but Billy wasn’t a bully anymore. At least not to Steve. “Now can we change the damn subject? It’s fucking weird.”

Harrington and Hagan stayed frozen in a tense silence, but Byers and Wheeler started snorting and guffawing over their side pickles until Jonathan knocked the table with pale knuckles. “It’ll be nice to have another dude around,” he noted with a smooth smile. “Happy to have ya, man.”

“Yeah, cheers to Billy!” Nancy agreed, raising her Coke facetiously. Jonathan met her with a chuckle and then Steve put his in, reanimated now that the tension had been shattered. He elbowed Billy who also brought his drink up, but refused to clink with the others. Instead he and Carol shared a hard look over the table and

Billy knew she'd gotten the message. No bullying Steve.

The mood had done a complete 180 and the other three teachers began arguing lightly about the male to female ratio at work and about how more male teachers would probably mean less fights. Listening to them for a while almost distracted Billy from the awkwardness of the previous subject matter, but then he felt an odd sensation all over his body, like some invisible force was weighing him down and when he glanced to the side he saw that Harrington was now staring at him openly. His deep brown Bambi-esque eyes had their signature look of blatant curiosity and interest and looked impossibly bright in the sunlight pouring in through the diner window. Billy's fingers itched for another cigarette to distract him. Something to occupy his hands to keep them from doing what they really wanted to do which was to reach out and brush Harrington's stupidly coiffed hair out of his face. There was no reasonable explanation as to why he would want to do that, but the picture made him feel both uneasy and relaxed. How that was possible he had no idea, but something in the back of his mind told Billy that he'd like to touch Steve. And Steve would allow it wouldn't he? Cause he'd called Billy sexy; had said he wished he looked like that. And in turn Billy had called his coworker good-looking.

Frowning, the California native gnawed irately at his lip as he turned back to his food which was going sadly cold during all this contemplation. Billy wasn't fucking blind, of course he could see Steve was attractive. Even if it was in a preppy, Abercrombie & Fitch, boy-next-door kind of way that he had never bothered to consider before. Still, the other man had a nearly perfectly symmetrical face that shone with an openness and honesty that drew others to him. His hair, big and ridiculous as it was, suited him and made him look goofy and approachable. Those huge eyes were warm like hot chocolate and his smile was contagious. He postured and gestured in loud, animated ways and had a whole rolodex of expressions and voices that all made him impossibly more interesting. For example, as he sat there still trying to stare a hole into the side of Billy's head he looked almost...predatory. Like he was stalking the other man sitting right beside him in a quietly seductive way.

Fuck.

Billy pushed his plate away. He wasn't even sure why he was observing his new friend in such a meticulous way and it confused the hell out of him. Why Steve would look at him like that unless it was purposeful was also something that put him on edge. He had to just hope that the English teacher, as unused to Billy as Billy was to him, was being overly observant at that moment as well. They were both throwing out odd and unfamiliar symbols that were easily misinterpreted. That was most likely what was going on. Not that it mattered or that Billy had any frame of reference, but Harrington seemed pretty straight to him. At the least, he had mentioned a slew of previous girlfriends in highschool and even admitted he and Wheeler had gone out for some time. An anti-social prick like Billy just wasn't used to such openness from other men in his life. How could he be with Neil as his prime example. Max and Juliette would probably tell him this was how friends acted.

Sure.

It was a bit intimidating.

Interesting too, though.

Overwhelmed by the intrusive thoughts and way past the point where he could just punch Steve for being so confusing, Billy fished his phone out of his pocket, glad that at least one thing had survived the cursed basketball shorts. The others were engrossed in their own conversation now and contemplating dessert so it wasn't as rude as Julie would've thought it was for him to open up a level of Angry Birds. He was just getting ready to smash some pigs to shit when he felt a warm pressure against his shoulder. It wasn't normal the way Billy's heart skipped a beat at the proximity, but then again, Steve's lips were almost making contact with his ear, breathing gently over his sensitive skin.

"Aw man, I fucking love laying around in my boxers and playing that game," the brunette whispered. Billy could tell he was smirking without looking over and scoffed. The blonde forced himself to keep calm. He worked really, really hard to keep his temper in check these days, especially with the girls, but sometimes he could still snap. It wasn't that he was annoyed, he just didn't like not understanding exactly what was going on and when, or why, the atmosphere had

suddenly changed between them because of some stupid jokes.

"Fuck off, Princess, or I'll start thinking you really are flirting with me," he rumbled back in an equally low voice, not looking away from his game.

Harrington chuckled in his ear, still abnormally close, and Billy had to try his very best not to shiver. He folded one long arm up over the booth behind Billy's back. "So what if I am?"

Billy's head turned to the side so quickly his nose almost bumped into Steve's. For a few seconds, Billy was a bit overwhelmed by how close their faces were, he usually only got this close to another man when they were about to fight, but then he noticed his coworker's eyes were amused. He was trying to get a rise out of him, but Billy wouldn't give him the fucking satisfaction. He challenged, "Are you?"

"Got a problem with that?"

This close, he could hardly see the entirety of Harrington's face, but he *felt* the way the other man's smile grew twisted and nasty at the edges. It was a disturbing look on him. The phrase, so familiar from an entire lifetime ago, sparked Billy's fight or flight and he definitely wasn't about to fly. He finally put his cell back in his pocket as he twisted in the booth, knocking Harrington's arm off the back so his own could rest there as he puffed out his chest threateningly. The brunette didn't retreat and Billy realized all at once he wasn't angry with Steve. He was excited.

"Depends on if you're serious or not, Pretty Boy," he countered. Steve hummed thoughtfully, eyes clearly trying to read Billy's. It was like they were the only two people in the booth. In the whole damn diner.

"It doesn't really matter, does it?" Harrington finally leaned away, his smile becoming softer now, all traces of that intense alluring aura dissipating as he slouched down in his seat innocently. He offered Billy a playful wink. "Coach Hargrove's a married man."

"Right," the other man mumbled dully as his coworker pushed over what was left of his fries in a sort of peace offering. The sudden

change in tone and the reminder of his marital status set Billy reeling and he felt himself deflating as he frowned.

“I’m just fucking with you, man,” Steve assured, slapping a large hand onto Billy’s nearly bare shoulder, “Don’t be so serious!”

Billy was pissed. He wasn’t sure why, but he felt like punching the other man right in his pretty face and straightening his stupid crooked nose. His heart was hammering away in his chest and he clenched and unclenched his fists as something like shame worked its way through his body in waves. He hadn’t felt like this since the last time he’d seen his father. What the hell?

Either sensing the bad mood or totally oblivious to it, Steve asked for his phone and saved his number into it before texting himself a slew of lude emojis. He said this was so he and Billy could text to meet up outside of work more often. When he tossed the device back, he got involved in his colleagues’ conversation, which now was about an upcoming festival Carol’s husband would be participating in with his band. Billy didn’t really pay much attention to it, only offering a couple of words so as not to be left out and because he wanted to be able to tell his wife he had made an effort to socialize.

It took a disturbing amount of effort on Billy’s part not to continuously turn his eyes on Steve. He kept thinking about their weird moment earlier and getting angry all over again every time he recalled Harrington saying he was just messing around. He hadn’t had any sincere friends in probably his whole adult life, so Billy didn’t know if it was normal to get offended by jokes or for jokes to get so...heated. He was pretty positive it hadn’t been Steve’s intention to make him feel so stupid and disappointed. Billy was no saint, he’d made plenty of nasty gay jokes when he’d been younger. He even still made them sometimes, but rather than the hyena-like laughs of his highschool lackeys, all they got him were stinging slaps on the arm from Julie and Maxine. However, he’d never flirted with another man to get his ire up; if that was even what Steve had been doing. He’d seemed sincere in all his observations about Billy’s physical attractiveness, so it didn’t really make sense to play at coming onto him if there was no real motivation behind it. Flirting in general, no matter the sexual preference, didn’t really seem like good joke material.

Or maybe Billy just didn't know how to socialize like a normal person.

He huffed annoyedly, not understanding the conflicting emotions making his blood boil. He didn't want to think about it.

When the topic of music taste came up, there was a colorful collection of cells brought to the table. Jonathan's ridiculous flip phone made a very brief appearance before Carol harassed him to take it away much to the science teacher's chagrin and everyone else's amusement. The rest of them had the standard variety of iPhones, Nancy's and Carol's protected in some ridiculously girlish cases while Steve's screen was shattered almost beyond use. Surprisingly Billy, Carol, and Jonathan had a similar collection of artists and albums curated in their iTunes library. Nancy was a lover of the Top 40s and had lots of pop in her playlists, but was very adamant she was also a fan of the *classic artists* like Britney Spears. Billy and Carol gagged at her. Steve's favorite artist was some solo creator Billy had never heard of that went by Owl City. He played a song lowly and the bubbly beat and rather ridiculous lyrics matched him perfectly.

*I guess we'll never know why sparrows love the snow
We'll turn off all of the lights and set this ballroom aglow*

"Sounds like you," Billy huffed, amused and less put off than he had been earlier as Steve bounced about in the booth.

"Hell yeah it does!" Harrington smiled. "He's got another album coming out this summer, I'm psyched!"

As they each took turns quietly playing some of their favorite songs for reference, Nancy having to look Jonathan's up for him on her YouTube app, Billy felt himself easing back into what this day was meant to be. He was fucking normal now, he was trying to make friends. He wasn't living under Neil's thumb anymore, he was allowed to enjoy another man's company without it being weird. So what if he and Steve got along and Steve liked to fuck with him? It wasn't like he was here trying to square up with Billy in the middle of the diner so it was fine. It was normal. Besides, Steve was a guy. The first guy Billy had ever bothered to notice was attractive, but a guy

nonetheless. And Billy was married. Maybe Steve was bisexual or something, but it didn't matter to the other man as long as he kept his distance. Sexual distance. If he behaved, Billy was fine with them hanging out more. He wasn't a giant dick anymore, or have Neil breathing down his back, he could have a bisexual friend.

Steve could be normal.

And if he turned out to be a huge asshole, Billy could just stop talking to him, Max had said so.

One day at the time with Steve, the gym teacher decided. That was the safest option for him so as to not get overwhelmed with all these new thoughts and feelings.

He'd never really had a friend before.

Billy didn't like going out when Juliette had the day off, because he worked during the week and she usually took shifts during the weekends. They rarely had a whole day together, nevermind without Max hanging around, so Billy usually tried to stay home when he knew his wife would be there too. While he'd started going to the diner more often with the English teachers, those were on days he knew Juliette wouldn't beat him home either way. And even though he dropped Max off at school every morning, her boyfriend usually drove her home. The redhead was thinking of getting her own job soon too.

Billy liked spending time with the other staff members even if they sometimes talked about really stupid stuff. Carol was an absolute riot and Jonathan proved a reliable well of knowledge of things to do around town that could actually pass as cool. Steve and Nancy were the resident preps, but Billy thought they were the only reason the rowdy group wasn't tossed out of the diner on a regular basis. They all treated Billy like he'd grown up right there in town with them and it made him feel like less of a loner loser whenever one of them came up to him in the hallways between classes. Even the kids had noticed the gym teacher had been brought into the fold and the girls spoke regularly about the likeliness of him falling in love with either Ms. Wheeler or Mrs. Hagan. That part was weird.

After the first successful diner date with Steve's fellow English teachers, the brunette kept pestering Billy about how they should hang out, just the two of them, to get to know each other better. Julie thought it was a good idea, since it wasn't like her husband had much to do when he wasn't working and Maxine pointed out he had yet to spend more than ten minutes alone with the guy off school property so that they could really talk and feel each other out. However, two whole work weeks passed before the two finally managed to make a plan of action. It was a Tuesday afternoon when Billy lowered himself into Harrington's passenger seat, the brunette chatting excitedly beside him as he started up the Beamer and pulled out of the school parking lot. They talked as they drove and Steve played a song called ' *West Coast Friendship* ' because it mentioned California and Billy laughed as his coworker sang along loudly. They ended up at some kind of fancy beer parlor that looked very rustic, all decorated in brick with lots of brown and gold. It reminded Billy of a pub, but a very nice and expensive one and he was a little stunned Hawkins had something like this to offer. Harrington insisted on paying for everything on the condition he was also allowed to pick all their drinks. Billy didn't protest because his wallet likely couldn't take the hit and he had no true idea what a 'flight' of beers could possibly be.

They sat on high, leathered stools at an equally high wooden table in a corner near the bar and settled in before Steve went to get them the much acclaimed beers while Billy appreciated his surroundings. He could hear Warren Zevon's voice coming from somewhere and figured Byers had really been the one to find this place at some point. Moments later Harrington returned with what looked like a long paddle board with four short glasses of beer balanced on top. The beers were all startling different colors and there was a laminated card that came along with them explaining the different flavor pallets, whatever the fuck that meant. Steve set them down with the firm order to not touch yet before he circled back to the bar and returned just as quickly with a bowl of mixed nuts, some of which were oddly round and green.

They shared the criminally small glasses, Harrington being sure to explain each beer within an inch of its life as they passed them back and forth, trading sips. There was a blonde ale, a double IPA, an

imperial stout, and a porter and Billy wasn't especially impressed with any of them. If he had to choose, he supposed he wouldn't choke to death on the stout, but he didn't see what was so wrong with just ordering a PBR. Steve called his tastes lowbrow and laughed when he bit into the weird green nut that ended up being fucking wasabi. They chatted casually as they ate and drank. They talked about everything, and the topics kept changing as fast as the speed of light, which was, in Billy's point of view, pretty impressive. Most people usually ran out of things to talk about at some point, but Steve always had something to say and questions to ask it seemed.

Billy got to know a lot of things he didn't know about the other man. Like how Steve had grown up pretty rich, but had fallen out with his parents and their money when he decided to go into teaching. How he'd been in what he thought was love with Wheeler for an embarrassingly long time and now somehow was set to be the best man at her wedding to Byers. Billy hadn't even known the two were engaged and Steve just went on and on. His best non-work friend, Robin, was a feisty lesbian who shared his tiny apartment and her girlfriend had sucked his dick in highschool. On and on. Harrington spoke about all his friends fondly, even as he described how Nancy and Jonathan had fucked behind his back. His eagerness seeped into every part of the conversation, including his prying into Billy's own affairs. He wanted to know about the gym teacher's life and the California native was fine indulging him to a certain extent. He told him how his mom had dipped out when he was a kid, how his dad was a mean son of a bitch with a God complex, and Max was the best damn thing that had ever happened to him. He talked about surfing and Max's skateboarding, and Juliette, and Steve soaked it up like a sponge, eyes open and earnest throughout.

The mood had a million chances to dip and grow somber, but it didn't, Harrington's natural enthusiasm keeping them both afloat. Two hours, three beer flights and lots of nuts later, Billy felt considerably more relaxed than he had in a long time, and even his body felt a bit lighter. Of course, that might've been because their knees kept bumping under the table and they kept kicking at each other softly in a way that probably wasn't very normal. Not that Billy could tell for normal, but he couldn't remember being playful like this with anyone back in California. Even with Juliette, he wasn't

much for joking or teasing and she had grown accustomed to that over the years. He didn't know if this was normal, but it was definitely new. It was new, but it didn't freak him out or anything. That was also new.

"So are you gay, or what?" Billy ended up asking bravely at some point, munching on some chips Steve had brought a few minutes previously. "Or queer, or whatever?"

"You just heard me talk about getting my dick sucked in highschool," Steve countered, face scrunched in a way that Billy thought meant he was on his way to being drunk. "By girls."

"Doesn't mean much," was Billy's short response and his coworker cut him a wary look until he merely shrugged. "I'm just curious, man, I don't give a shit."

Harrington snorted disbelievingly, but leaned his elbows onto the table leisurely as he answered, "I'm straight. At least...I've never had to wonder about it, you know?" He shrugged and offered Billy a lopsided smirk that looked a little tight in the corners. "I guess I'd be down to love anyone who loved me, but I haven't been very lucky in that department either way."

Billy quirked an eyebrow upwards, noticing the subtle change of tone. He brushed salt from his fingertips idly as he shrugged, going for casual but landing somewhere around tense. "Don't take it too hard, man. Pretty boy like you? Plenty of fish in the sea."

Steve's laugh was ugly and pig-like as he brushed a hand down his face, whole body trembling with mirth as he nodded. "Sure," he wheezed, "Sure, who cares if the fish is a dude, right? So many fish with tons of other issues anyway."

"What kind of issues?"

"Like the fish being married," the taller man blurted, eyes finding the ceiling immediately as Billy had the distinct pleasure of watching a blush crawl up his neck. Suddenly all the beer was sloshing about hot in his belly and there was a tension building around their tiny table that hadn't been there before. "Or something..."

"Yeah," Billy mused dumbly, own eyes diverted across the bar as his brain tried to flee the conversation they weren't really having. It was a common concern in the dating pool, but somehow the blonde felt that the sentiment was aimed directly at him and his marriage. It was fucking stupid. "Yeah, that would suck."

They stewed in silence for a few seconds and their gazes eventually found their way back to each other. Harrington's face looked like if Hargrove reached out and touched it, it would be hot to the touch. His eyes were wide and open as they'd always been and he didn't seem uncomfortable, but Billy still couldn't read his expression, which was weird considering Steve wore his emotions on his sleeve. To some extent the tension was a bit entertaining to the gym teacher; an interesting change from the constant teasing and poorly disguised flirting his coworker was always dishing out.

He took pity on the country bumpkin not too much later, reaching for his pack of cigarettes and tossing one to Steve. Even though Harrington had talked about quitting when they first hung out, he never refused when Billy offered to light him up after school and today was no different as the skinny English teacher leaned over and let Billy bring an open flame dangerously close to his face. His large hand closed around the other man's wrist to steady the lighter and Billy enjoyed the contact. Lighting a smoke for someone was oddly intimate and he was a little grateful every time Steve decided to say 'fuck it' to his years smoke free and let Billy fill his lungs with ash.

"What about you?" Steve replied, now in a more casual tone, eyeing Billy attentively, smoke furling through his ridiculous hair. "You're married to a woman so I'm guessing you're straight?"

"Yeah," Billy acquiesced, cigarette jammed between his dry lips as he leaned against the table which had grown cluttered with empty glasses and crumpled napkins as the afternoon wore on. "Kinda always had a lot of girls hanging around...Juliette just hung around longer."

"Juliette." Harrington's mouth curved around his wife's name in a way that made the Billy feel decidedly uncomfortable. "Nice name. Her parents deep into Shakespeare, or...?"

The other man nodded, mouth occupied taking a heavy pull of smoke. It billowed all around them as he answered, "Yeah, definitely. She's got a brother named Sebastian."

"From *Twelfth Night*!" Steve enthused, ashing into a tray as his companion shrugged. Billy had never known what play the name was from, had just taken the family's word that it was super fucking Shakespearean. The English teacher seemed amused and rested his cheek against his hand as he went on. "How'd you guys meet?"

"Highschool," was the bland reply. "Before my old man moved Max and her mom down here, we lived near the beach and every day when I would skip class to surf she'd follow me and try to convince me to go back so I wouldn't get my ass kicked."

"Seems like she was smitten with you, man."

"Most chicks were," Billy snorted, recalling the slew of girls he'd managed to get into bed before he'd gotten serious about his future wife. "But Julie was different. She helped with Max and was just always bein' sweet and shit and never got tired of me even when I was a huge dick half the time. After a while...it just seemed like I should keep her around. Plus when Neil wanted to move out here and I wanted to stay, her parents said they'd put me up, but only if I made her 'an honest woman'."

He rushed through the last bit of the short story, knowing it wasn't the most romantic, and watched the cycle of expressions that made their way across Harrington's face. He seemed perplexed, then surprised, then concerned, then understanding. He ashed his cigarette again and ran his free hand through his hair so that it fluffed up in the front like a cockatoo. Billy waited on baited breath for his response, leg thumping under the table noisily until the taller man merely shrugged.

"Good on you, dude," he huffed, leaning back in his stool to stretch, shirt riding up to expose his flat and hairless stomach as he groaned, "I don't know if I could've pulled the trigger on something like that so young."

Billy blinked, having been momentarily blinded by the flash of skin,

but then shrugged. "Marriage ain't so bad," he assured, eyes focused down on his shaky hand. "It's nice having someone around who gets me."

Harrington resettled in his seat, aura contemplative as he eyed his coworker too openly as was his style. The air around them wasn't tense or somber or awkward or uncomfortable, it was just still. Finally Steve reached out and smacked Billy on the arm, his hand lingering on the touch just a bit longer than necessary. "You're a hard man to get to know, Hargrove. Juliette must be something special; wish I had someone like that."

Billy huffed through his nose, put off by the physical contact and by the idea someone as open and inviting as Steve Harrington could struggle to find love in his life. That he could walk around thinking he was unlucky in romance. The gym coach shook his head and kicked a foot out to jostle his friend's chair. "You won't be waiting long, pretty boy. I'm sure there's someone out there dying to have you."

Steve absolutely beamed.

"So you *can* say nice things once in a while," he teased, smashing the rest of his cigarette on the silvery ashtray. Billy noted absently that he'd spent more time holding the thing than actually smoking it. "I'm gonna hit the head then grab us another round."

Billy watched him get up and head towards the restrooms with long strides and when he was out of sight he sighed. Rubbing a rough hand down his face he fought the urge to kick his own ass as he sat and waited for Steve to come back. Even if he didn't want to acknowledge it, there was definitely something different between them. The atmosphere the two men created was interesting and exciting and intimidating all at once and Billy took the moment alone to wonder what the hell he was doing. Why was he being so fucking nice to Harrington? Why had he spoken so dismissively of Juliette? It was bullshit and it was getting to him something bad. Their teasing and Steve's flirting was too much; it was too familiar. They shouldn't be acting and talking like this especially since Billy was enjoying it so much.

This wasn't what he had wanted; he had wanted something normal. He wasn't the master of interpersonal relationships, but he knew something here wasn't normal and that's what his damaged ass needed. He didn't need *this* ; he didn't need *Steve* . The more time they spent together, though, the more Billy could feel himself being drawn to the other man like he had his own gravitational pull or some shit. He wanted to test the boundaries of their new and shaky friendship and he had no good idea why. Everything about this situation was new to him so he couldn't predict what he, or Steve, would do. Getting to know Juliette hadn't felt this precarious. Meeting Max had only shaken him up about half as much.

By the time Steve returned, with at last two *regular* sized pints, Billy had finished his cigarette and his coworker seemed to have reverted back to his usual, overly jolly mood. He fussed about the table, clearing their empty glasses and bowls to the bar, and returned with a smile so bright that Billy imagined it could be studied from space. He blinked dazedly at Harrington before tipping his glass in his direction.

"Good beer," he noted, taking a large swig right after while Steve laughed wheezily.

"I told you it would be." The other man crossed his arms over his chest, not seeming terribly interested in his own pint as he relaxed back to stare. He was always staring and Billy had decided long ago to just let him. "Glad you came out?"

"Don't I look glad?"

"Why you gotta bust balls?" They both snickered at this, but Harrington was quick to return to his staring and his too wide smile shrunk down to something soft and far too sincere for Billy's liking. "Well, I'm glad. I'm really hoping you and I can be friends, Hargrove."

Billy couldn't really return the smile for some reason, but still murmured into his glass, "Sure, dude...me too."